

Asylum

-Sarah Medeiros

Characters

Narrator

Male or Female (up to director's discretion), dressed in unnoticeable, ordinary clothing

Melia Burnes

Sixteen year old girl, skirt and buttoned shirt, somewhat preppy, has her book-bag at her feet.

Japera Silwer (*pronounced like "sewer", emphasis on 1st syllable*)

Thirty-eight year old woman, could be what Melia will look like in twenty-two years, dressed conservatively, has some sort of writing utensil in her shirt pocket. Not necessarily pretty.

Cecil Barrett

Forty-something man, dressed in typical janitorial uniform, always has glasses hanging around his neck or in chest pocket.

Enégal

Homeless person, unidentifiable age (although most likely older than Cecil), under rags and dirt it is hard to see Enégal's face or even distinguish a gender, spends entire play not really sitting in chair, but collapsed.

Setting

Stage is all black.

Four chairs, a little right of center stage. The Narrator spends the entire play either standing or leaning against the walls of the stage (R, L, or Up).

Lights up. Enégal is already on his chair, the Narrator is leaning stage right. Melia, Japera and Cecil all walk in as the lights are rising, and walk to sit in their chairs. The seating order from stage right to left: Enégal, Cecil, Japera, Melia. They do not look at each other, or even acknowledge each other's existence. Once they are seated, silence. The Narrator looks at them all, calm, unmoved, entirely unemotional.

Narrator

You feel like you've seen this before. It's understandable. (*pushes off wall to walk towards center*) We all look very familiar, right? Like you know our faces but can't quite place them. (*Pause, crosses left in front of all four, who are still sitting, staring straight ahead*) Maybe she (*gestures to Melia*) sat behind you in algebra. (*Crosses to stand behind her chair*) You probably don't remember her because you never heard her say a word in class. (*Steps behind Japera's chair*) Maybe she was that teacher who you loved to hate because she was always so inhumanly... human. Although you never heard a word she said in class either. (*Gestures to Cecil*) You always said hello to him in the hallways, with a polite nod and smile – but you have no idea what he looks like. Does he have green eyes? Brown ones? (*Pause, steps back, looks at the audience*) You're wondering if it matters. And I know that at least one of you is thinking that I am a hypocrite. (*While speaking the next few lines walks front again, right around Cecil & Enégal*) Did I talk to every person in my high school class? Did I hang on every teacher's word? Did I befriend my building's janitor? Of course not. I am a hypocrite, and I'm willing to bet a fair amount of money that you are too. Yes, all of you. These people (*gestures to the others*) are *not* the stereotypes you might *want* them to be. Sometimes the stereotype is easier to deal with. (*walks back to where he/she started*)

Melia coughs, stands up, puts backpack on floor. Begins to step forward, then back again, clearly uncomfortable, tries to smile. Clears her throat.

Melia

I was never very good at public speaking, you see. (*Apologetic*) A teacher once told me that I looked like I was in pain. (*Laughs nervously, steels her reserve, begins:*) My mother said he loved her once. Years ago, when they were first married and neither knew any better he loved her, would bring her a flower he picked on the walk home every evening, sometimes a buttery dandelion, a violet perennial to waste away in the spider-spun glass vases she found in pawn shops and thought made the table look so much more sophisticated than what he could give her. It wasn't until later that she started to hate him, accusing his simplicity for her dissatisfaction, her boredom, the fact that she could not make herself forget the life she had promised herself before she had learned that not all in life can be how you want it, and decided everything was wrong because he didn't love her. He did, in his own way. He tried to read her desires in her sighs and glares, to pick out little presents she wanted on days that didn't have any significance, hoping that the surprise of insignificance would bring her back to him. When she left, he didn't do anything – *anything* - and I cannot forgive him for that.

(Steps back, picks up bag, sits down, her turn finished. Japera stands, not overtly nervous, but stiff)

Japera

(Starts out almost indifferent, hopeless, ends passionately)

I could have been anyone:
At home: the cold stone
of childhood,
reflecting the beam

of my flashlight
in our basement,
words about plants,
cells, birds –
an
enchantment I could
not wish to break:
sleep did not matter
when the world
was before me
in these pictures,
pages slick
with their own richness,
and for as long as I
can remember
afterwards
I chased
that dream I found
in my basement after bedtime.
I thought,
once,
that I wished
to discover new
species,
cells,
theories,
and learn by doing
all day:
But others knew
better.
So I left
my visions
of
Nobels and Scientific American

in that dark
and mossy basement,
traded in awards
for in-class essays.
Teaching seemed
like
my next
step,
a predetermined
course for someone
who didn't believe
those stories
told by my parents'
church,
believed in what
I could see
and touch,
what the goose-bumps
on my arms
told me when
I learned
that only certain stars
explode
or that this woman
died
because of a broken
heart.
Gave up my own
heart
to try to change the minds
of students
whose minds are set
from the moment
their feet touch

my classroom's linoleum floor.
I spend weeks
and days
listening to girls
and boys belittle
the miracles
of the atom's structure
or the beauty
of a scalpel
sliding through slick
flesh, revealing
bones, tissues,
death,
or the words
I construct to tell
them otherwise,
that you can't say
it's stupid
if it isn't yours, if you
haven't laid down
your heart
at its feet and prayed,
even if you never pray,
that it would give
anything
back so you can call it
your own.

(Beat – sits down as if she has said too much. Cecil is smiling as if he heard every word she just said. No, he was not listening – but he heard her. This is the essence of their non-relationship. He stands, slowly, taking his time, adjusts his clothes. When Cecil starts speaking, the Narrator decides to walk stage right, perhaps nudge Melia's schoolbag closer to her chair, perhaps

tosses some outer layer – like a jacket or tie, etc. – of his clothes into the stage right wings, and then leans against the wall there.)

Cecil

Reaching to perfection can hurt, sometimes,
If the goal is one you hate.
Deception is a very potent crime,
But overused as of late.

I do not mean in the sense of plain lies,
Or costumes, hats and keys,
But in denying what is truly wise
For the self's conscious ease.

I have worked at this school for twenty years,
Washed away Sharpie words
And cleaned up glass, observed the teachers' fears
Of the torment of the “nerds,”

Seen student protests, marches and breakdowns,
Watched my daughter start her first day of school
Here, learn the difference between verbs and nouns,
Stayed out of the way so she could be “cool” –

Even worked the day my wife went away.
So I know a thing or two
About this educational *cachet*:
And I'd recommend my views.

(Sits down. Long silence – maybe 10 seconds, after Cecil is seated – as if they are waiting for Enégal to speak. He/She does not. The Narrator is staring at the ground through the silence, the others continue to stare straight into the audience.)

Narrator

(Still looking down) You want to hear my story? *(looks up)* You want to hear that I come from some small hometown? Hated high school? Admired my parents? Shot the dog? Married my cousin? *(Pause)* Well, I don't have one. A story, that is. I don't exist, you see. I am the transitional character – the narrator. I don't know if I even serve a function in this play. Maybe I'm just here to give the real characters time to remember their lines. *(Almost the second he/she stops speaking, Melia stands, steps forward, almost desperate in her actions)*

Melia

I don't know why I hate her. Sometimes I think it is because she looks a little like my mother, earthen* eyes, auburn* hair, a scent of dissatisfaction wafting from her clothes on warm days, honey-like in its thickness, other times it is because she is so transparently ridiculous in her desire to be liked, like an insect that sacrifices itself to its offspring in order for them to feed before they die from starvation. *(Pause)* Most of the time it's because everyone else does. *(Pause)* I'm not afraid to admit it, to admit that I just want to be a part of the bigger picture, a green leaf in a springtime tree, a hydrogen molecule in a cloud, a speck of dust in a sunbeam; it's just easier to hate her. She just makes it so easy. Her name is even easy to ridicule: Miss *Sew-er*. She should just let people pronounce it *Sil-wer* and avoid the whispers of the oh-so-creative names that teenagers think up during recess, “Stinky Sewer,” “Slimy Sewer,” “Sucks- *(Cuts herself off)* Etcetera. The other kids in my class hate science, think it is useless – they believe they won't need it when they get older, because, after all, what fast-food cashier needs to know the chemical properties of nitrate? I actually don't mind science, but I have never met anyone else who seems to love it like she does, as if it is her husband, house and bed all at once, what she goes home to and wakes up for every day. It is almost maddening.

(Sits back down. Japera stands, pats down her skirt, takes a deep breath, and begins)

Japera

I do not usually mind
teaching,
the spreading of words
and facts
and knowledge can be
intoxicating,
like the moon
on a winter night
or the grass on a windy
day or the eyes
of someone you
never saw before
and
know
you will never
see
again.
But on days
when the students
feel
vindictive, when the papers
pile higher than my lamp,
when I go home
and the silence
is so suffocating
that I have to close the door
and walk outside again
just to breathe –
knowledge isn't enough.
Being good

isn't enough –
Power
might be enough.
The power in the destruction
of an atom,
in the creation
of an element,
in the system of another
human being,
or the ocean,
the power in myself
to –

(Pause)

If I was not a teacher.
Today was one
of those days
when the students –
who are just so young –
make me angry enough
to wish
they were older
so I could tell
them how I really feel:
like hitting
them, every one
of their smirking,
sickening
faces.
But I cannot feel
that way.
So I left the school
frustrated,
so tired
of trying

to be what I need
to become, driving
fast to outrun
myself.

(A steering wheel is dropped from rafters to Japera, who catches it and then sits, holding it as if she was sitting in a car. Cecil stands)

Cecil

I saw her unlike anyone else, hushed
In her own universe after hours.
I could see her early dreams had been crushed
By “reason” and reality’s powers.

There was a stream-washed light surrounding her
Always, and sometimes she was so beautiful
I had to watch her move, face a cold blur
through the glass, devoted and dutiful.

Some low days I could almost feel her yearn
To be anywhere else, to wherever
Her old desires continued to burn
Before they and she were forced to sever.

I suppose I can’t really claim to love
Her, only hoping from afar, to see
Her practice labs with apron and a glove
And lock up after with my ring of keys –

And yet, I am sure I know her better
Than anyone else in this damnèd school,
Everyone doing their jobs to the letter,
And ignoring each other – as a rule.

(Stands for a moment, sad, before sitting down again. Melia stands slowly, almost ashamed.)

Melia

I don’t know why the students were feeling mean today during science class, maybe the lack of sun this entire week made them restless, or the fact that we had just finished a particularly arduous test, or that it was simply the last period of the day and we could almost taste the outside air that didn’t smell of formaldehyde and notebook paper. Whatever it was, today, we stepped over the line. Fifteen minutes before the end of class, Greg actually stood up and mocked Miss Silwer to her face, her words, her actions, the way her eyes expand in excitement when she starts preparing us for a new subject, and I could see something sharp snap inside her, like a cable in the wind, sparks electrocuting anything that trips in its path. She screamed, and screamed at him, and sent Greg to the principal’s office, and then stared at the door once he left, face blanker than the pages filling my notebook, until she picked up her bag and left, too, just walked out and left us in our seats to wonder for a moment what had just happened before we all rushed to the doors at once and ended up in a person-filled traffic jam to get out of the classroom as fast as possible because it suddenly seemed wrong to still be there. Now I’m in my dad’s car (*steering wheel drops to her, too*), driving home, wondering what I would do if I could not be who I tried so hard to.

(Steering wheel in her hands, she sits, much like Japera, as if she is driving. Japera stands, holding wheel, turning it as if she was driving while speaking)

Japera

(Angry, almost unstable)
In that classroom, watching

them laugh:
I didn't want to be there anymore,
didn't want to see
their
youthful
laughing faces,
their satisfied *twinkling* eyes,
so I ran,
almost ran into
the poor janitor,
ran out to my car,
my haven of metal and plastic
and glass, so I could drive home
and not think
about
them
anymore. But it
didn't work,
*(As she speaks these next few lines, the stage lights should dim
into complete darkness, except for a bright spotlight on her)*
I am in my car,
driving,
listening to my voicemail,
and I cannot
stop
thinking about them,
about myself,
about how much I have let
myself
down by leaving,
flying to the highway
away from my greatest fear:
that within the job
I did not want

for myself,
I have failed.
Failed to become someone
I can live
with from day to day.
No, I am not
an award-winning journalist
or a revered scientist,
but if I could *teach*
these children
something
about the astounding
and changing world
they have to live
in
then I could be *happy*
with what I have
done.
But I am not
happy,
I cannot
teach
them about what I love,
and so here I am, driving
through a dry
lightning storm,
heat making
the sky toll
and shock
the ground into listening –
and I see a lorry
stall, shudder and turn
in the middle of the highway,
and suddenly

I know
it is heading
for my car,
but I cannot move,
all I can think
is

please Father
let me live –

(her spotlight cuts to black, another spotlight lights on Melia a millisecond after, Melia is already standing, turning steering wheel as if she is driving throughout the speech. Japera should exit stage left during Melia's speech)

Melia *(anxious)*

I never really understood how the sky could produce lightning without rain, and if it was explained during class I obviously didn't listen, but with or without rain I never liked lightning, the uncontrollable power in that burst of electricity, its deceptive fragility, how thin and yet how merciless. I have only had my license for a month, and I wish that I had not started to drive home during this water-less storm, hope that the traffic is not too bad and that my dad will stay at work until it is over. But then one of those bolts strikes the cement right in front of my car and I jump, put on the brakes too hard too fast and feel the truck behind me turn, tires squealing on the road, and once my car stops moving I –

(her spotlight cuts to black, and another spotlight fades onto Cecil. While Cecil is speaking, Melia sits down, and her wheel is pulled up into the rafters)

Cecil

(As he speaks, the stage lights fade up and the spotlight fades out, to reveal Japera's empty space and the Narrator leaning

against the center up stage wall)

I wondered why she was crying when she
Left, wanted to stop her, keep her safe, but
She was gone before I could form a plea,
The words caught in my throat as the door shut.

(Cecil sits down slowly, Melia stands up slowly, a hospital-standard blanket is dropped from the rafters and she wraps it around her shoulders before she begins)

Melia

I was unconscious for a long time. They told me that she died on impact, and that it was not my fault that the lightning struck the road in front of us, and that in fact I am very lucky to be alive, although they were concerned I might be in shock so they're keeping me here for a couple days just to make sure. *(laughs a little despondently)* I am – in shock. I don't say much to anyone, not the nurses, or the man who was driving the truck when he came to see if I was okay, or my father when he visits. I can't quite put the words together, even in my thoughts. I feel disconnected, like a – computer cable. He isn't here today. My dad. He went to her funeral. I don't know if I'm glad that they wouldn't let me leave.

(Sits down, wrapping blanket tighter around herself. A black hat is dropped from the rafters to Cecil, who does not put it on but holds it in front of himself. Stands up, shakily)

Cecil

I should be thanking God that my daughter
Is alive, can speak and think and breathe; but
All I can focus on is the slaughter
Of someone I know – deep in my gut –

Could have loved me back. No, I don't blame my child,
But I cannot understand why *she* had
To die. I would feel refreshed when she smiled –
And yes, I know, you all must think I'm mad

To love someone to whom I never spoke.
But I cannot help but feel it was right,
Somehow, to think that she is what awoke
In me feelings I thought had taken flight

The day my wife abandoned her family.
Now I stand at this woman's grave, the sole
Person besides the priest to come and see
That she is buried, her body whole

And resting still. I will – wish I could say –
(stops himself, continues with the beginning of his sentence)
Leave this place to the homeless person I
See behind her grave, silent among gray
Stones. Now, my dear, I need to say goodbye.

(Takes flower out from the inside of his hat, and drops it onto the floor, pauses, and then sits.)

The Narrator steps forward, begins to say something, but Enégal stands and begins his/her speech, at which the Narrator stops, surprised, and steps back to continue leaning against the wall.)

Enégal

The lives we live are insignificant yet they mean so much to those who watch us meaning the people who watch each other because not everything is watched but it is meaningful even if you make it up because you can do that these days make things into meanings that never existed before and death could be a

relief if you do not believe in the afterlife because what relief is it if you have to continue existing once you don't exist anymore unless the cells sewn come apart at the seams like DNA that catches on a thread and trips over a rotting body but we can find out what that means now because we can discover anything no matter what happens afterwards but the narrator disagrees to a degree in the sixth degree of separation you have met me before you know me because I know you but you have seen me on the sidewalk train subway track in the corner with the mice like in the mazes but isn't it familiar all this haven't you seen it before it seems awfully familiar to me because it has all been said before every word has been formed we've been around for too long we need to regeneration renew be reborn so that there is newness again right now it is all old old old and boring and been said don't you think that this combination of words has been uttered in the four thousand years that human beings have lived on this earth because it doesn't make sense otherwise I cannot imagine originality like the ideas of children whose ideas are all original because they cannot have known them otherwise unless of course you believe in reincarnation in which case that child was once Newton Darwin Franklin Pascal doesn't it make more sense that way unless it doesn't in which case nothing is original in any case but some how some way all of this matters because NONE OF THIS MATTERS ANYMORE!

(Winded, Enégal sits down, reverting to his/her collapsed position. The Narrator seems stunned, steps forward and around Melia to the front of the stage, is dumbstruck)

Narrator

Well. I think that says it all.

(Walks off stage right. Lights fade out.)

End.